

A Good Memory...As Attractive in a Woman as Beauty

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A few days ago, I was asked to think about a world similar to that in Ray Bradbury's story *Fahrenheit 451*, that is, a world without books. In this tale, all books are systematically burned. It's a theme that is often taken up in fictional dystopian works.

I was asked to name just one book, specifically one Jewish book, that I would memorize, to pass along orally, generation to generation, until books could once more be published. Sadly, the rules of this game stipulated that I couldn't name Tanakh or Talmud. Before we get to which you'd choose and which book I chose, I thought it would be good to explore the importance of a good memory in Judaism.

The ability to remember is an essential skill in Judaism. We remember the exodus from Egypt every day. Our greatest scholars pride themselves on the breadth and depth with which they remember core texts. A good memory is even considered attractive in women:

The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of surpassing beauty in the world — Sarah, Rahav, Abigail and Esther. According to the one who says that Esther was sallow, Vashti should be inserted in place of Esther.

Our Rabbis taught: Rahav inspired lust by her name; Yael by her voice; Abigail by her memory; Michal daughter of Saul by her appearance. (B. Megillah 15a)

We have here two lists of four attractive women. Rahav makes both lists as does Abigail (one of King David's wives). Actually, when you think about it, both lists are composed of exceptionally clever women, and one of those attractive qualities is a good memory. Maybe we can get Vogue to do a spread on women with good memories (halevai!).

This longing for a good memory is seen in some of our customs. We dip bread (Shabbat challah) in salt. The bread represents Torah and the salt is the preservative. Likewise, on Rosh Hashanah we dip the apple (a fruit representing knowledge) in a preservative (honey) to symbolize a wish for a new year of learning that will be well remembered. It is not enough to learn a thing...it must be learned, installed on your "hard drive" and "duplicated" and "forwarded" to others. With that in mind...on to the questions!

Discussion Questions

1. Which one Jewish book would you choose to memorize and pass on? Why this book?
2. Which non-Jewish book would you choose and why?
3. We know so much more about how memory works than we did even 50 years ago. Do you think we are capable of remembering better than people did in the 1960's or not as well?

As to the book I chose, I picked *Sacred Trash*. It's a book about the Cairo Genizah. I picked it not only because it's a beautifully written book but because it would also provide a sort of "how to" manual for recovering scattered texts of the past. It tells the stories of the historians who found the Genizah and took the time to decode what looked like valueless pieces of trash and see the history therein.

As always, looking forward to your answers!